BELOVED ADVERSARY
Genesis 32:22-30
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The occasion is an important one for the life of this church. Ordination and Installation are the prerogative of the Presbytery in our system. The Presbytery of Scioto Valley is in charge today. At its last meeting it appointed a commission to act in its behalf and to ordain and install the candidates it had examined and approved. At the conclusion of the service several persons will address ordinands and congregation, in specific terms, about the new relationship that exists. My responsibility, and my privilege, at the invitation of Jerry and Barbara Beavers, is to preach the sermon for the occasion. I presume on that privilege, for a few moments at least, to say a little about where we have been and where we are and where we are going.

In fact, I heard a story just two weeks ago which sets the context. A motorist, a city motorist, on his way to Lima, was totally lost on an Ohio back road. After a very long time he finally saw a farmer - working his field. The motorist stopped his car, got out, waved to the farmer - and when he was within earshot called out, "How do I get from here to Lima?" The farmer thought for several moments and said, finally, "If I wanted to go to Lima, I wouldn't start from here." Jerry and Barbara, even though that breaks all the rules of homiletics, I decided to risk it, because it fits so much of what I know about your lives over the past several years. Anyone who wanted to end up here - at this service of ordination - wouldn't have started where you did.

But you did and your story - your faith journey is part of what we celebrate today. From the United States Navy and life as a settled, middle American family, to a year in private industry and life in suburbia, to enrollment and three years as full-time students on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary, it was an arduous journey. As the intense final leg began, the complexity, as you know, increased. The transfer from the Presbyterian Church U.S. to United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the discrepancies between ordination requirements, the intricacies of the process, the necessity to candidate and graduate and negotiate and purchase a home and pick up and move again, and the mishaps which would have been major but for the fact that time would not allow you the luxury of any but minor mishaps - sprained ankle the day before you were to preach trial sermons, automobile accidents and burglaries. Your journey in recent months has been intense - but steady, never varying far from course. No one would choose to begin it from the point you began. But you have done it - and we love you for it - and the more we think about it we keep seeing the steady hand of another, sometimes guiding, sometimes prodding, sometimes stalling, but always present, creatively participating in the journey.

Carr. Keilor - story - phenomenon

We have come, in recent years, to place new value on our personal story. Alex Haley and the subsequent "Roots" phenomenon, was at least partially responsible for helping us to understand the significance of our own personal history. For many Christians it was a reminder of something we should always have known; namely, that our religion is a story, basically: that the story of God is woven into human stories: stories of men and women who lived and loved and died and who sound very much like us. This God - from the beginning, is really not an abstraction. He is not described very well really, as the First Cause, the Ethical Imperative, or even the immutable, omnipotent, infinite source of being, but rather the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph - or, if you will, the God of Joe, Sally, Fred, Betty, Jerry and Barbara.

Apart from whatever ego satisfaction we receive from talking about ourselves, the truth is that in Christian faith, our personal story is taken up into the story of God and His people. The characters in the larger, ongoing story are people like us: we are invited to consider them, identify with them and locate our story in theirs.

Jerry and Barbara, your story is very much the point of what we are about this morning. I invite you, and everyone else, for that matter, to locate something personal in this old story out of a distant past. Listen now to the word of God:

(Genesis 32)

> The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob". Then he said, "You name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peni'el, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

That story is at least 3,600 years old. Hearing it is like seeing a fragment of pottery in a museum: old, crumbling, encrusted, just a small piece of what once was a beautiful and meaningful work of art. The whole story of Jacob is not, in fact, very uplifting. If you believe that dishonesty and fraud don't pay - don't read up on Jacob. He succeeded at both. The second of a set of twins, Jacob convinced his elder brother Esau to exchange his birthright for a bowl of hot stew. And that was only a warm-up for one of the worst frauds of all time. His father Isaac was nearly blind, weak, ready to die. It was time to hand on the blessing to his eldest son. With the collusion of his mother, Jacob impersonated Esau, disguised his voice, wore his clothes, even made his hands and neck feel hairy like Esau's, and managed, somehow, to be the recipient of a blessing so important it could never be given again, or taken back, for that matter. When Esau discovered what happened he was obviously angry. In fact, he promised to kill Jacob. Jacob fled - to his uncle's place, and on the way experienced that memorable dream of a ladder, and the angels of God and the repetition of the blessing and promise of God to His people. Jacob stayed with his uncle Laban for twenty years and his character didn't improve at all.

Jacob worked as a herdsman, married his cousin Rachel, fathered many children and became very comfortable. Success, however, is due - again - to Jacob's dishonesty and fraudulent relationship with his uncle. In fact, Jacob is systematically stealing his father-in-law's sheep out from under him. When he has accumulated so much it's embarassing, he decides it's time to go home, which he does, secretly, at night. His wife even steals the family valuables from her father's house for good measure.

That's the character who is heading for Canaan, and who begins to think about the people still at home; namely, Esau, the brother he cheated twenty years earlier. With an immense caravan of livestock and family strung out for miles, Jacob thinks about the encounter and at a stream called the Jabbok, sends everybody across, but decides to spend the night there, on the far side, alone. To savor the triumphant entry? Out of fear? To pray and meditate? Who knows?

He is accosted by a man with whom he wrestles - all night long, a faceless man who refuses to be identified, who wounds Jacob in the thigh and who - because Jacob is now holding on for dear life, blesses Jacob again, just before disappearing in the early

light of dawn. And the story ends with Jacob - now called Israel, limping home to a reunion with Esau, and to get on with the business of living out the story of God and His people.

What do you make of that story...this crude saga about a shrewd businessman wrestling all night with somebody, just this side of the promised land? Is it no more than a bronze age myth? Or is God's word in it too? Is it possible that pieces of our story might find a place in it? The truth is that if you and I are alive intellectually and honest morally, we will be accosted by some strangers with whom we will have to struggle. The truth is that God is the one with whom we ultimately have to do. Jacob was accountable finally. He had earned, cheated, worked and defrauded his way into success. But, ultimately, he was accountable, in a mysterious way, to his God.

The philosophers have understood that, even when the church has forgotten it. Frederick Nietzsche was an ardent opponent of Christianity precisely because he understood the power inherent in the very idea of God. In a novel, one of his characters is arguing that God must be killed. He says, "God looks with eyes that see everything. He peers into man's ground and depth, into his hidden shame and ugliness." (Thus Spake Zarathustra - in Paul Tillich, Shaking of the Foundation, p.42). Paul Tillich wrote, "He is God only because he is inescapable. And only that which is inescapable is God." (Ibid., p.40).

The God who is truly God will accost us. We are accountable to Him. He will surprise us and He will be, at times, our adversary. If we are looking only for comfort, assurance and the emotional gratification of knowing our salvation, we will in fact miss the God who emerges from this old, old story.

This God will give us some sleepless nights. This God will call us to account precisely by forcing us to wrestle when we'd rather relax. Nobody wants to wrestle with the difficult and painful issue of abortion - who would choose to do that? I don't want to have to wrestle with the claims of national security over against the claims of peace making it a Christian priority. I'd far rather sleep than lie awake fretting about the conflicting arguments of the Business Community and the Environmentalists. But may I suggest that the reality of God is posited precisely in those struggles: that His presence is more often than not documented in the nagging presentation of moral, political, economic issues we would rather ignore: and that religion that is irrelevant - is religion which proclaims too much peace and provides a too comfortable shelter from the painful but vital issues of our common life.

Jacob never did get a clear shot at him. He never did find out his adversary's name. In his world, to know the name of something, was to control it. That's why people don't say the name of God in the Old Testament. So this blessed foe never totally revealed himself. The mystery remains: the identity is shrouded in mist and darkness.

That's a danger for us, and a temptation, too, particularly for those to whom others ask ultimate kinds of questions. This God resists being defined too precisely and known too fully. The trouble with religion in general, and religious professionals in particular, is that we begin to believe that we can wrestle with God and pin Him. We take ourselves altogether too seriously theologically. But God is truth and the statements we make about Him are only small portions of a greater truth. The most arrogant sin is always religion that claims all the truth for its own. Some of the saddest moments in history have resulted from that arrogance. This old story asks for space - empty space in our struggle for wonder and mystery: space for God to be our God when and how He chooses.

Jacob's journey had been a long and complex one. Along the way he had provided handsomely for himself and his family. As he looked across the Jabbok to the encampment on the other side he saw wives and slaves and thousands of heads of livestock and sons for whom the tribes of Israel would one day be named. And I wonder if God, in His wisdom, simply decided that before it was too late Jacob had to learn the most important lesson in life; namely, that we can't ever earn what we really need: that what we really need in life can only be given to us.

That's what Frederick Buechner suggests..."...there are a few things in this world you can't get but can only be given, and one of these things is love in general, and another is the love of God in particular." (Peculiar Treasurers, p.57).

Perhaps this beloved adversary has to accost us, unexpectedly, some dark night to teach us the hardest lesson of all: that what we really must have to live - is all grace, undeserved, unmerited, unexpected grace: like the gift of children and a wife or husband to love, and music, and laughter and ecstacy and joy.

Perhaps the story has to end there - because for you and me it isn't finished yet. Jacob had the good sense to hold on to his beloved adversary and in the early light of morning to limp across the border into the promised land, crippled - but a new and better man now.

So, in God's grace, may it be for us. For you, Jerry and Barbara, in the years of ministry ahead - and for all of us. God will not answer all our questions. He will not reveal all of himself. He will continue surprising us with struggles that keep us sleepless at midnight. But, by His grace - this dear and beloved adversary will be our God. He will not leave us alone. He will love us - and be with us and save us.

Amen.

God eternal, we pray as humble, faltering servants. Surprise us - startle us - struggle with us, and finally, God our Father, give us the assurance of Your presence: Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Cling — you may be crippled — you have to be a little